

SLEEPING GIANT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL



View from an overlook <½ mile south of the Sleeping Giant Ranch. The gravel county road visible at right runs approximately north-south and is the eastern boundary for the lower third of the property. The property is one-mile wide for most of its extent, extends up into the grassland on the lower portion of the Giant adjoining BLM and DNRC land, and extends down into Towhead Gulch visible at middle left. The powerline runs NNW. Photo taken prior to green up May 2019.

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2019)

1. **Region:** 3 **Regional Supervisor:** Mark Deleray

Name of Applicant(s): Jenny Sika

2. **Date:** May 30, 2019

3. **Project Name:** Sleeping Giant WMA **Type of Project:** Fee Title

Project may change and be considered for FWP CE, either with the landowner retaining the property, or with FWP fee title acquisition and resale with FWP CE. Discussions are ongoing. The initial project proposal and discussion was for FWP acquisition and FWP stewardship as a WMA. Subsequent conversations, internally and with the landowner, have included all three alternatives.

4. **Size:** ~1967 private acres

5. **Location:** 15 miles North of Helena and 10 miles north of Lake Helena WMA, <2-mile drive from I-15, Lewis & Clark County, FWP Region 3, see Figure 1.

6. **Map(s):** See attached Figures 1-8, pages 12-19.

Figure 1. Project location

Figure 2. Detail of Sleeping Giant Ranch Property, streams, and adjoining public land

Figure 3. Project and public land

Figure 4. Project and private & public land ownership

Figure 5. Project, private & public land ownership, and conservation easements

Figure 6. Wildlife locations (elk and pronghorn)

Figure 7. Wildlife locations (bighorn sheep and mountain goat)

Figure 8. Wildlife movement corridors along the continental divide and from the continental divide to the Big Belt mountains

Photos: See cover page and pages 4, 7, and 9-11.

- Sleeping Giant Ranch and Sleeping Giant landmark, cover
- Bull elk winter range, p. 4
- Bull elk on winter range, p. 7
- Aerial photos of Sleeping Giant Ranch and surrounding landscape, p. 9-11

7. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.**

The benefits of this property include increasing the amount of existing, contiguous protected wildlife habitat, hunting opportunity, and stream access for angler, as well as providing public access into the backcountry of the BLM's Sleeping Giant, an area with special designation. This property would be a new WMA, is adjacent to DNRC and BLM (Figures 2-3), and is within an intact landscape (Figures 4-5).

This property would provide hunting opportunity for elk, pronghorn, white-tailed and mule deer, and black bear, as well as winter range and spring calving/fawning areas for these ungulate species. Lying within HD 339, hunters would be able to pursue older-age class bulls with the either-sex permit both on the property and beyond, into the rugged backcountry of the Sleeping Giant BLM, which is preferred habitat for bulls during all but the rut. In addition, this property falls within a wildlife movement corridor between the continental divide and the Big Belt mountains, and it was a likely travel route for the grizzly bears recently documented in the Big Belts.

Two perennial streams exist on the property, and the landowner has water rights on both streams.

Under FWP stewardship as a WMA, the property would remain undeveloped, conserve and enhance land, water, wildlife and fisheries values, contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities as well as hiking, wildlife viewing, and accessibility to an historic site¹ and area^{2,3}, and it would maintain the scenic qualities of the lower portion of the Sleeping Giant, an iconic landmark of the Helena area.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.

1967 Total acres, 96-100% Tier 1 (Figure 2):

- 73% Montane Grassland and Sagebrush Steppe, both Tier 1, 1429 acres: The upper portion of the property (Sleeping Giant's lower chest) is native grasslands consisting primarily of bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue and forbs. The lower portions of the property are intact sagebrush steppe, except for 76 acres that are irrigated to produce certified weed-free hay.
- 23% Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland, Tier 1, 478 acres: old-growth ponderosa and Douglas fir; there may be some limber and lodgepole pine, and cottonwoods (as exists on the adjacent BLM land).
- 4% Cropland, 76 acres: certified weed-free hay; could be reclaimed to native, sagebrush return would be long but over-seeding with native grasses would be an initial step
- 5.6 miles of streams

9. Project Level Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

There are a number of items that make this habitat on this property high value:

- Year-round use by elk, pronghorn antelope, white-tailed deer, and mule deer, and seasonal use by black bears, and year-round or

¹ Hilger Ranch on the historical register

² Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and Native American Pictographs

³ Other recreational pursuits are secondary and must be consistent with management and stewardship as a WMA

seasonal use for additional small and large carnivores (Figure 6). This property provides calving and wintering areas for elk, and fawning areas for deer and pronghorn. Pronghorn habitat is limited in this area, and it is shrinking in the Helena valley 7 miles south of this property.



Bull elk winter range, greater Sleeping Giant area, January 2019.

- The property would provide hunting opportunity for all of these species on the property and public access and hunting into the backcountry portion of the BLM's Sleeping Giant where there isn't any at present, except from the Missouri River. The property falls within HD 339, a limited entry either-sex permit area for elk, and FWP ownership would expand this unique opportunity.
- There is a small, struggling population of bighorn sheep within the BLM Sleeping Giant and surrounding private land, and FWP ownership may limit additional threats to these local, wild sheep (Figure 7). The season is currently closed. Should a season resume for bighorn sheep in the district, this property would provide excellent access. Mountain goats were extirpated after the last reintroduction of bighorn sheep to the area.
- A long-billed curlew, S3B,⁴ was observed on the state section adjoining the eastern boundary of the property on 5/2/2019. This area is

⁴ State Status S3B: Potentially at risk because of limited and/or declining numbers, range and/or habitat, even though it may be abundant in some areas; at risk during the breeding season

occupied breeding habitat for them, and it is likely occupied by other sagebrush-obligate songbirds.

- The property lies within an intact wildlife movement corridor between the continental divide to the east and the Big Belt mountains, including the Beartooth WMA on the east side of the Missouri River (Figure 8). This is one likely pathway from the NCDE for verified grizzly bear sightings and potential occupancy in the Big Belts.
- There is some old growth ponderosa pine on the property. While the recent epidemic bug kill did reach and affect this area, there are remaining trees that look healthy and it appears the infestation and tree death have finally subsided.

b) Threat Status:

- **IMMINENT - 10 pts: The land is proposed for activity within the next year**, which will cause irreversible impacts. An out of country buyer has made an offer to the landowner. The landowner would like to see the property benefit wildlife and for FWP to be the steward but is intent to sell in the very near term. Under the existing MLR CE, there are no specific wildlife protections except for actively nesting rare or endangered birds, there are no public access opportunities, and six additional homes are allowed. The property bisects habitat utilized by pronghorn antelope, within a broader area where pronghorn habitat is severely compromised. Extirpation at this western extent is probable without further development planning and protection.

c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.

Describe as follows:

- Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) **No**.
- Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) **Yes**, we are working with the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust (MFWCT) and the Conservation Fund. The MFWCT has been integral in recent additions to the Canyon Creek WMA (also within the Missouri River Basin) in 2010⁵, 2016⁶, and two additions that closed in May 2019⁷. There is a high level of interest in this project, MFWCT is considering this as a possible legacy project, and there is funding available for projects within the Missouri River Basin⁸. Their commitment to the area is high, and their history of funding FWP acquisitions demonstrates their trust in FWP stewardship. As we move forward, we may contact other potential

⁵ Purchased and donated to FWP

⁶ Multi-partner effort

⁷ Provided acquisition funds, 2018 funding cycle

⁸ \$0.5 million is still available from the 2019 funding cycle; the 2020 funding cycle may also be a possibility—FWP will submit an application to the MFWCT as soon as possible after this proposal is completed.

partners, such as Lewis and Clark County Open Space Fund, RMEF, and Cinnabar, organizations which were also contributors to the 2016 Canyon Creek WMA Addition.

- Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county?
(3 pts) **Yes**, 1429 acres/73% of the project are Montane Grassland (bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue) and sagebrush steppe within Lewis and Clark County.
- Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan?
(3 pts) **Yes**, the *Montana Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy*. There are contemporary reports of bighorn ewes south of the BLM on private land.
- Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor?
(3 pts) **Yes**, the property is within a wildlife connectivity area between the continental divide wildlife corridor and the Big Belt mountains, a probable conduit for NCDE grizzly bears over the river and into the Big Belts (Figure 8).

d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

The project is within one large parcel and is configured to support conservation values and strategic public access into public land backcountry. It is adjacent to both BLM and DNRC land, which adjoin private land with conservation easements held by MLR (Figures 2-5). The Sleeping Giant BLM is designated as a Wilderness Study Area and an Area of Critical Environmental Concern with management objectives to preserve resource values, provide primitive recreational opportunities, and promote wildlife and habitat values. Privately-owned land in the greater area is in substantial blocks (Sieben, Campbell, Chevalier, Oxbow Ranches). The Sieben Ranch adjoins the project property for 3.5 miles, supports and provides public hunting access, and has two FWP conservation easements on portions of the property also within HD 339. The contiguous footprint of protected lands for this property combined with adjacent public land and private land with MLR easements is substantial: 1967 project acres, 30,179 public acres, plus 18,982 CE acres is a total of over 50,000 acres. It would provide public access into the southeastern backcountry of the Sleeping Giant BLM, and it is within an intact wildlife movement corridor.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

This property would provide hunting opportunity for elk, pronghorn antelope, white-tailed and mule deer, and black bear, with easy access from I-15 to a county road along the east side of the property. Elk hunting would include older age class bull elk with the limited either-sex permit offered in D/E HD 339. Due to the rugged country of the Sleeping Giant BLM, it is preferred winter habitat for bull elk in the district, and access on and through this

property would be a good place to pursue them during the rifle season. The flatter terrain of this greater area is also where hunters pursue bulls during the archery season (rutting grounds), and where those holding the pronghorn either-sex permit for the district go to pursue them. The Sieben Ranch allows hunting through Block Management, and at least one other ranch in the more immediate area allows a limited amount of hunting with permission. The hunting experience would be more fluid across multiple ownership boundaries, both public and private, and we would expect a great deal of use by hunters during the fall, because it is only a short drive (<15-20 min) out of the Helena valley and off the interstate. Should a season resume for bighorn sheep in the district, this property would provide excellent access (Figure 7).



Same location as bull elk winter range above, 10 bull elk observed during annual survey in January 2019.

This property would also provide angling and native fish restoration opportunities on Towhead and Beartooth Creek. Although fish population surveys have not been conducted recently in either stream, the current fish species composition is likely a mix of rainbow trout, brown trout, brook trout, and mottled sculpin. These species continue to be highly sought after by anglers. However, native Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) restoration efforts by the Fisheries Division continue to be a priority. Increased access to streams on the proposed Sleeping Giant WMA could provide additional opportunities to expand nearby genetically pure WCT populations found in streams within the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area or other Helena area WCT populations (Skelly Gulch and Log Gulch Reservoir).

Additional recreation opportunities could include hiking, wildlife viewing, and accessibility to an historic site⁹ and area^{10,11}, and it would maintain the scenic qualities of lower portion of the Sleeping Giant, an iconic landmark of the Helena area. Hiking to “the Giant” would be within reasonable reach for those wanting to do so, and there is public interest in such an opportunity.

f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.**

The landowner holds first water rights with this property. We are not aware of any additional tax or fee obligations associated with this property, other than the state taxes that FWP would continue to pay.

No immediate infrastructure improvements are anticipated except for a parking area, signing, and some fencing/fencing repair near the buildings to restrict off-road travel beyond the county road. The county road runs along a portion of the eastern boundary and continues past the home sites and off the property to the northeast. It would provide adequate public access to the property. At present, we would not plan to graze this property under FWP ownership, but we would obviously continue to maintain fencing. Most of the fence lines are readily accessible and not within forested habitat, and we expect it will take less time and expense to maintain than those on forested WMAs, where we are dealing with bug-killed trees continually falling. At present, we are working with BCHA to facilitate volunteer work on the Canyon Creek WMA, we have a multi-year history with volunteer efforts at Lake Helena, and in the future we would also work with volunteers to assist with tasks at this property.

This property is north on I-15, only 15 miles from Lake Helena WMA and 20 miles from the city limits of Helena. It is then a short drive (<2 mi) to the property. We are currently contracting weed treatment on both the Lake Helena WMA and the Canyon Creek WMA (the two existing WMAs within the Helena biologist’s responsibility area), and the same approach would be expected for this property. We are not aware of any extensive weed issues. The portion of the property that was cultivated was for weed-free hay!

On the property, there are Hilger Family cabin sites, which are on the historic register, a small residential home, and several outbuildings. FWP would have the flexibility to maintain or remove any of these buildings except for those on the historic register.

⁹ Hilger Ranch on the historical register

¹⁰ Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and Native American Pictographs

¹¹ Other recreational pursuits are secondary and must be consistent with management and stewardship as a WMA



Aerial view of the Sleeping Giant Ranch from the southwest corner, looking to the north. The gravel county road visible at right runs approximately north-south and is the eastern boundary for the lower third of the property. The property is one-mile wide for most of its extent, extends up into the grassland on the lower portion of the Giant adjoining BLM and DNRC land, and extends down into Towhead Gulch visible at left. Photo taken prior to green up May 2019.



Aerial view looking northeast.



Aerial view looking north-northeast of lower portion of the Giant.



Aerial view looking east-southeast.



Close-up aerial view of a portion of the forested and upper grassland areas.



Aerial view looking west-southwest, toward I-15..

Figure 1. Project Location: Sleeping Giant Ranch Property, ~15 miles north of Helena and ~10 miles north of Lake Helena WMA, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery).

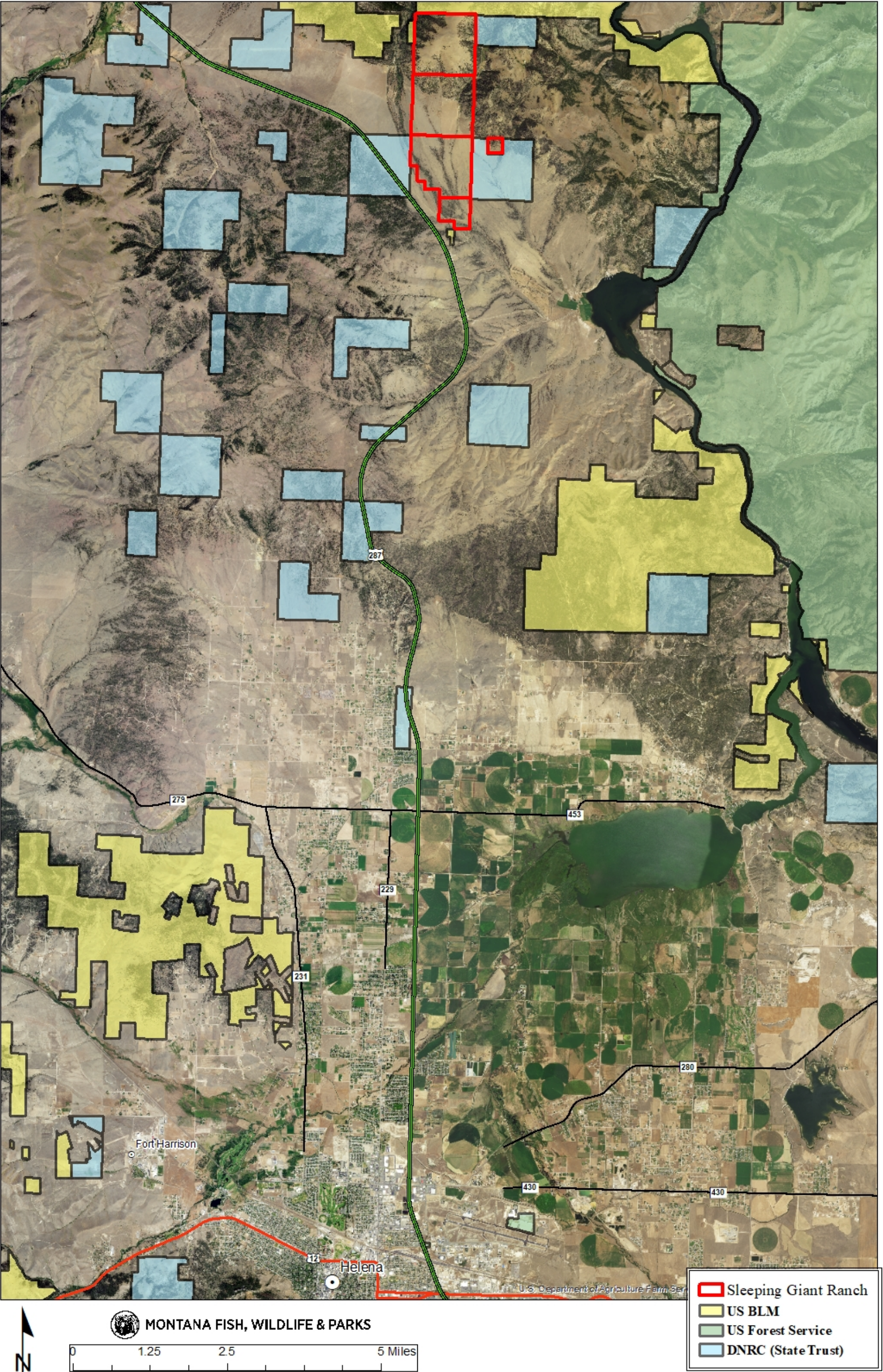


Figure 2. Detail of Sleeping Giant Ranch Property, streams, and adjoining public land (U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation [State Trust]), Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). A county road lies at the eastern boundary, as shown. Land not colored is also private land.

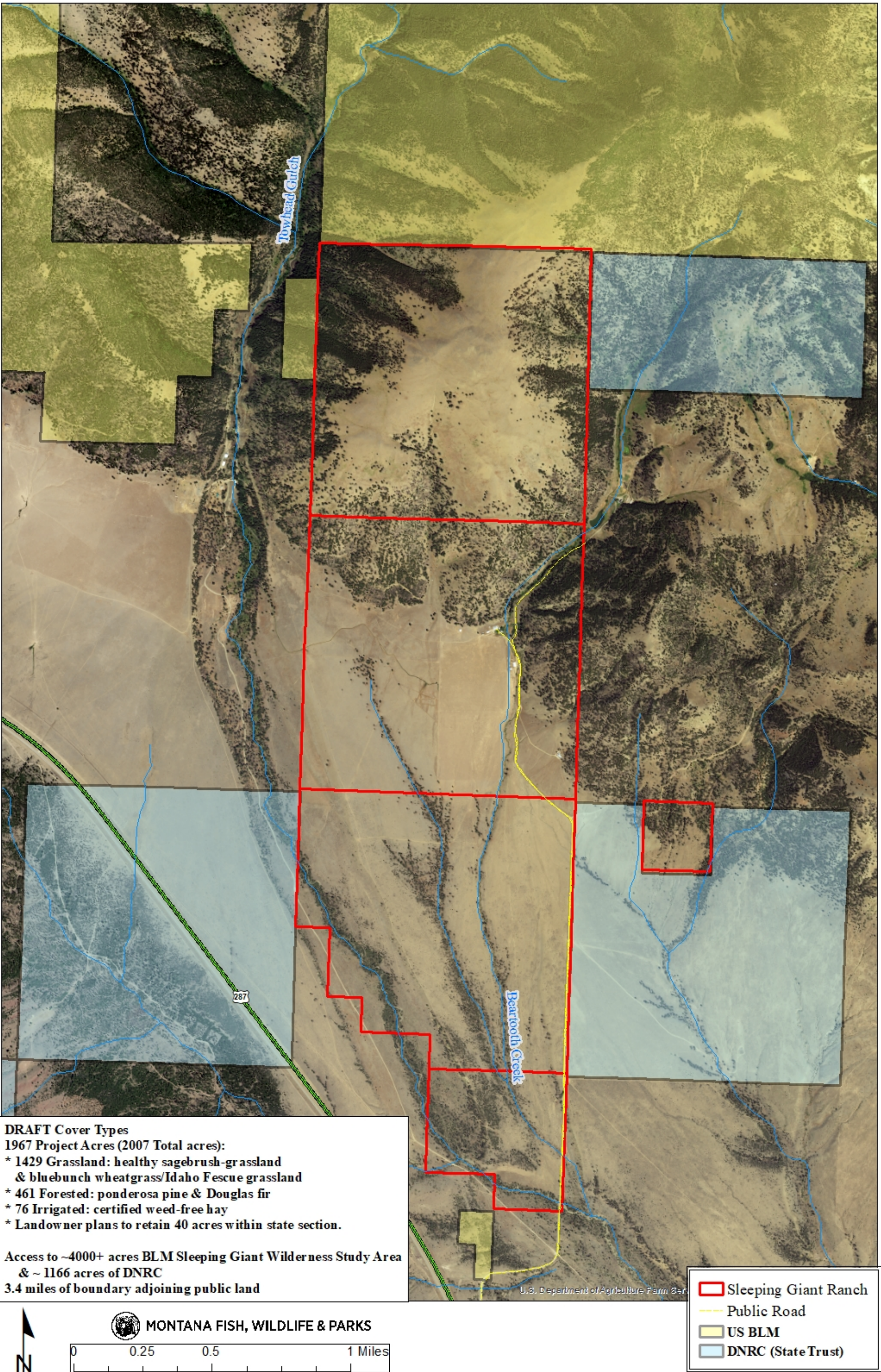


Figure 3. Sleeping Giant Ranch Property, DNRC, BLM, FWP, and USFS land, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). Land not colored is also private land. The project would provide direct public access to the southeastern backcountry portion of the Sleeping Giant BLM WSA, which is only directly accessible from the Missouri River at present.

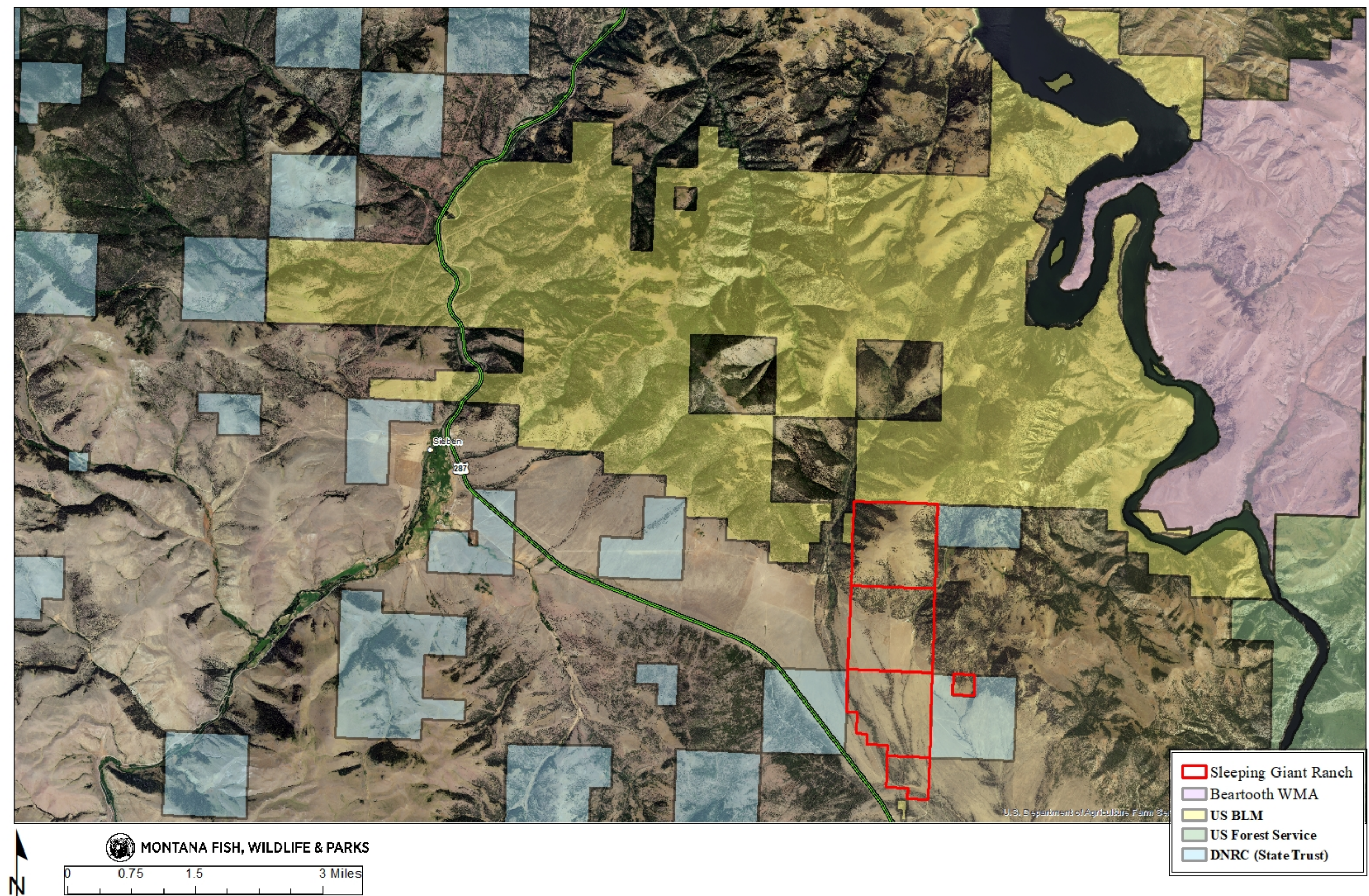


Figure 4. Sleeping Giant Ranch Property and surrounding land ownership, including public land (BLM, DNRC, FWP, USFS), Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). Land not colored is also private land.

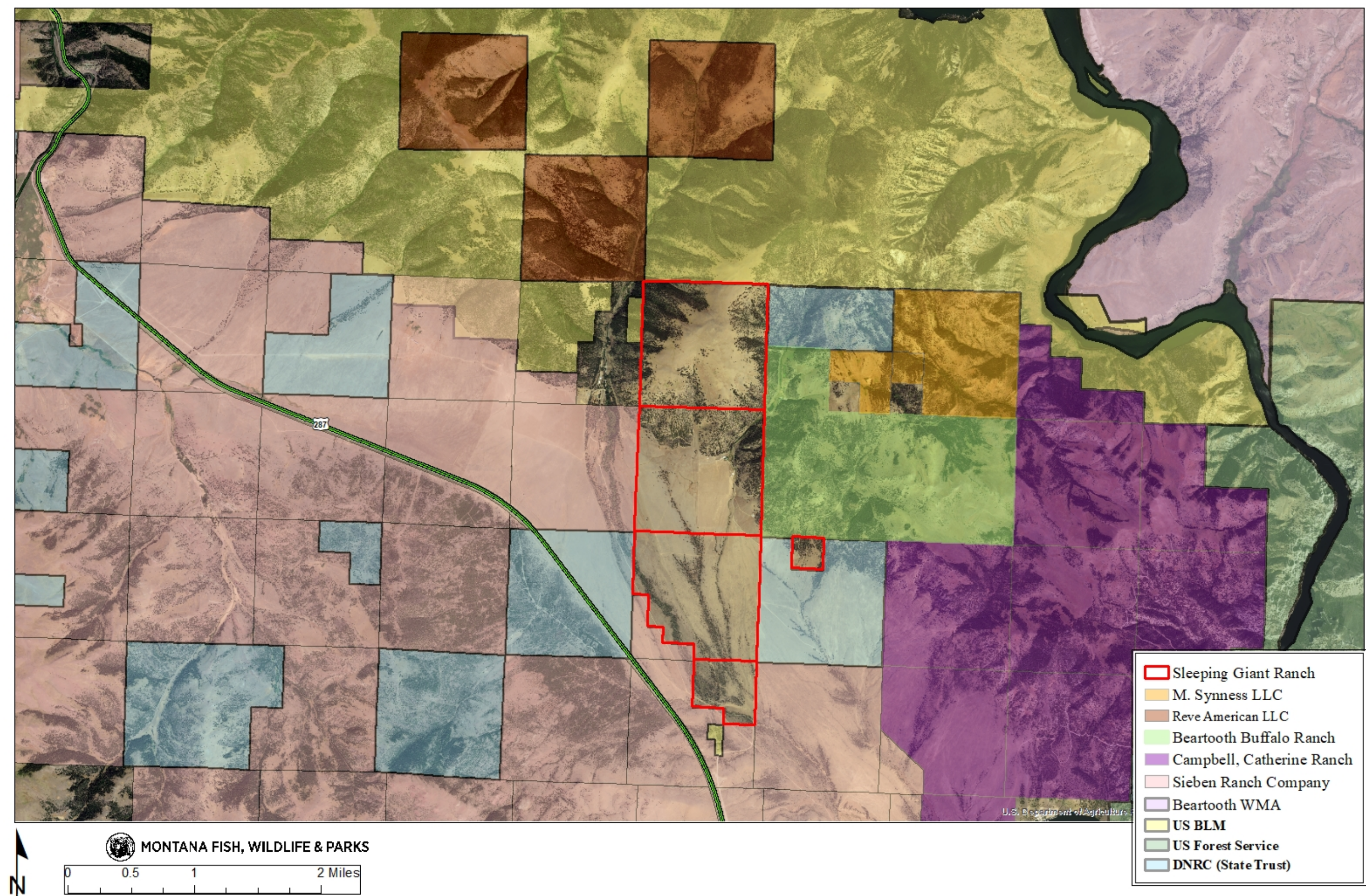


Figure 5. Sleeping Giant Ranch Property and surrounding land ownership, including land with conservation easements held by other entities and public land, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). Land not colored is also private land.

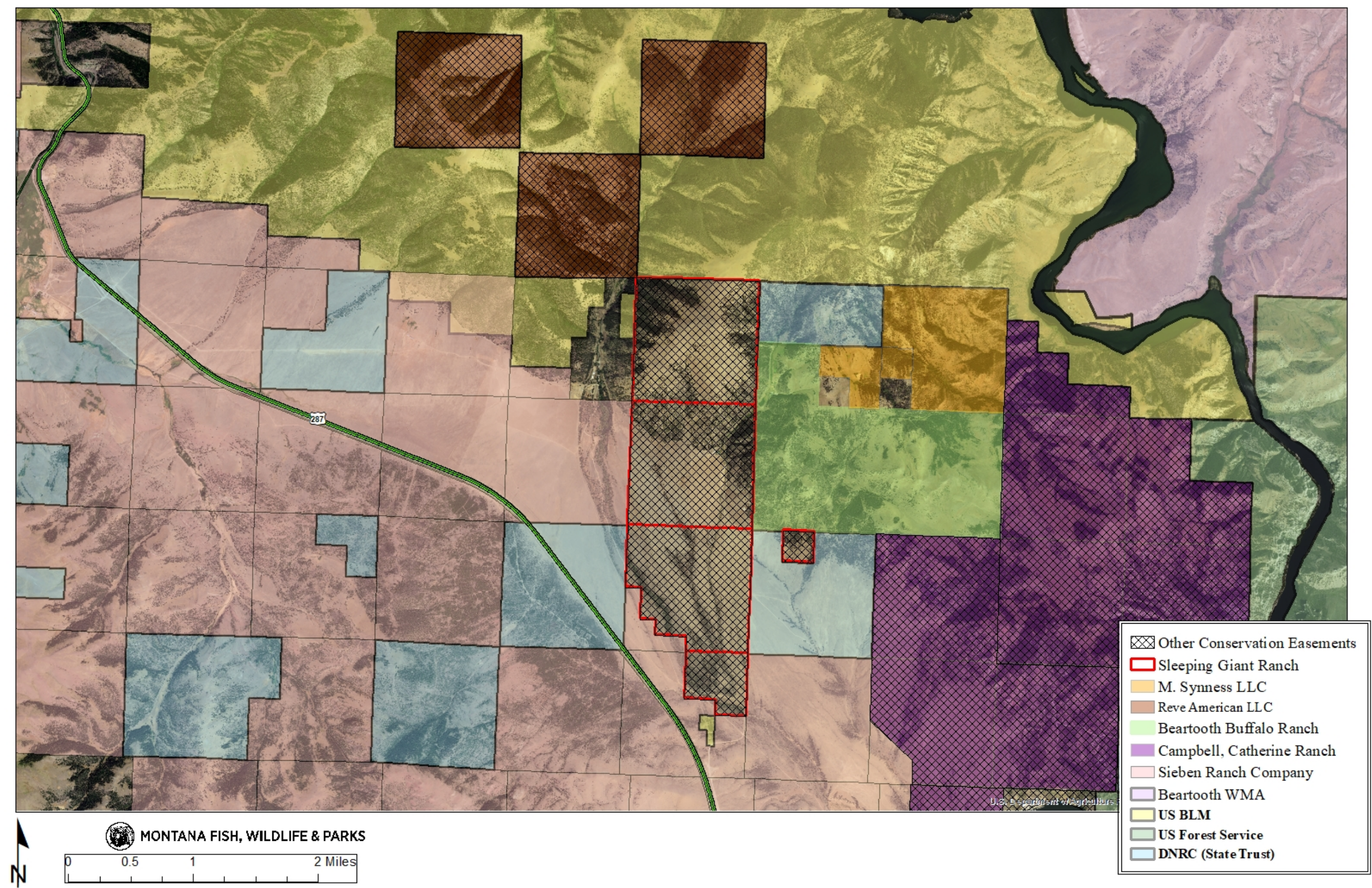


Figure 6. Sleeping Giant Ranch Property and surrounding area with elk and pronghorn observations made during FWP annual, aerial surveys, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). Land not colored is also private land. Elk surveys were conducted in winter, and pronghorn surveys were conducted during summer.

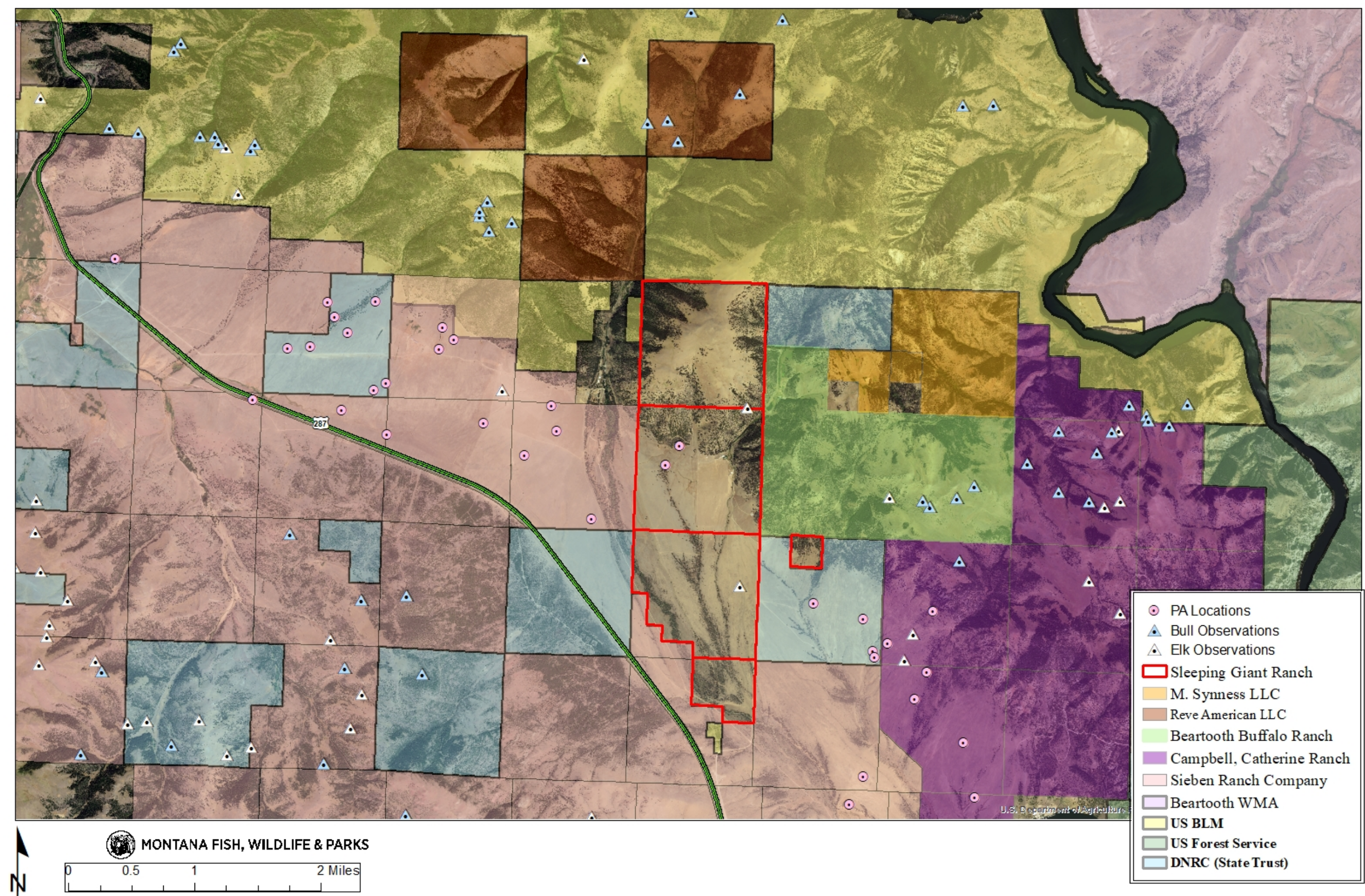


Figure 7. Sleeping Giant Ranch Property and surrounding area with bighorn sheep and mountain goat observations, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2017 imagery). Land not colored is also private land. Note that mountain goats were extirpated from the Sleeping Giant area following bighorn sheep reintroduction.

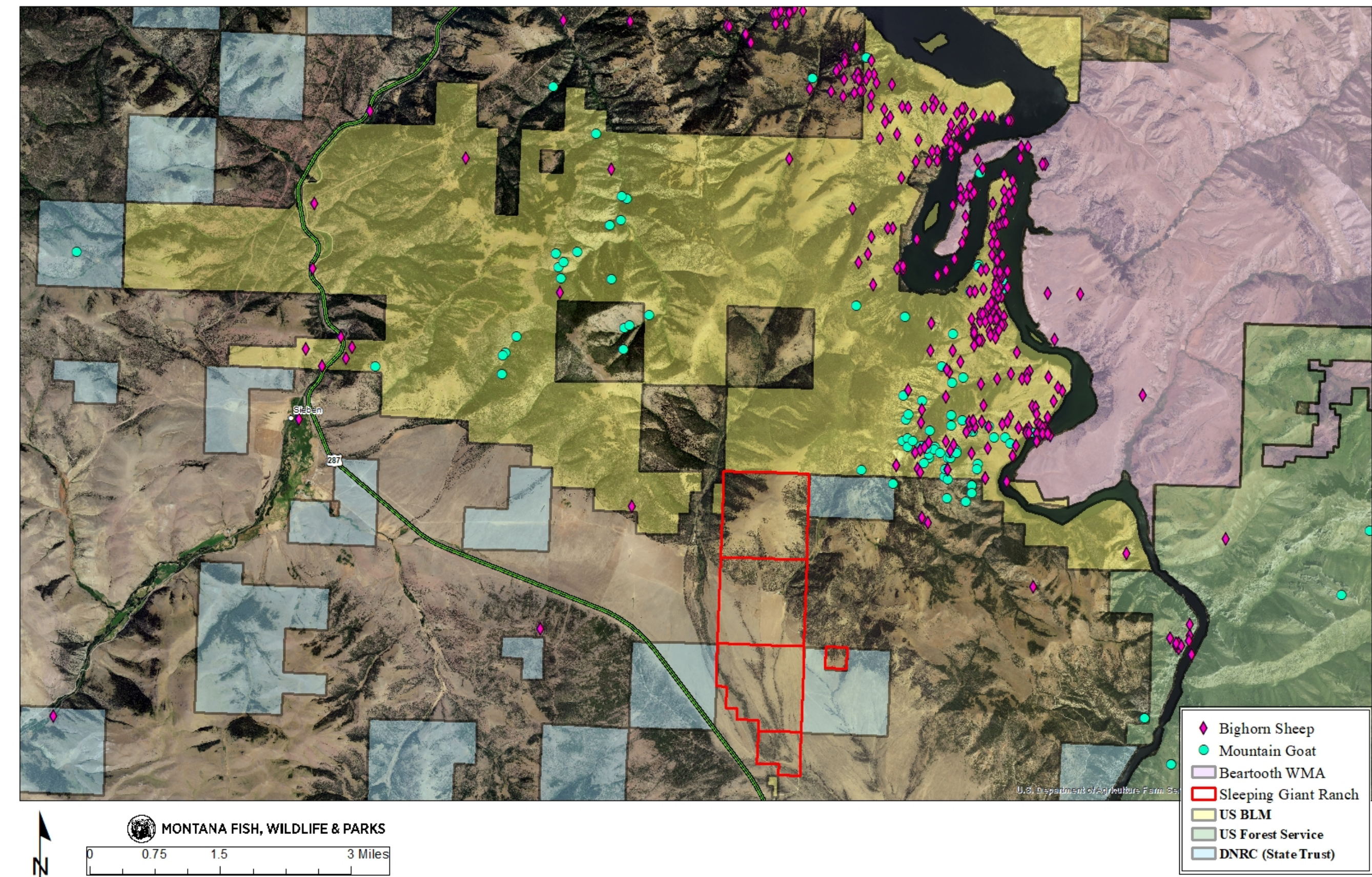


Figure 8. Wildlife movement corridors along the continental divide and from the continental divide to the Big Belt mountains. (Figure copied from the 2007 Canyon Creek WMA Management Plan.)

